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PERCEPTION OF CRIME, INSECURITY AND SOCIAL SEGMENTATION¹

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Within the framework of the CRIMPREV coordination action (Assessing Deviance, Crime and Prevention in Europe), financed by the European Commission and implemented by a multidisciplinary consortium of European participants, the University of Liège organised on April 10th and 11th 2008 a seminar devoted to the study of insecurity and the phenomenon of social exclusion.

¹ Please note that *Workpackage 4* aims at achieving the compilation of knowledge about the perceptions of insecurity and of crime. Based on a (socio-historical) approach of the various knowledge compiled together in various fields of the European Union, it aims at a better understanding of the impact in terms of quality of life and social cohesion (discriminations, mechanisms of reject, social segregation) of the development of the feeling of insecurity. The various seminars are devoted to the study of the wider characteristics likely to influence fear of crime and the feeling of insecurity (for instance, in terms of evolution of the informal social control, the increase of the public expectations and the transformations of the European societies). A special attention was given to the way the media cover the legal issues.



This seminar focused on the “Perception of crime, insecurity and social segmentation”. What consequences of insecurity and perception of crime can we identify in discriminations and social segregations and in the possible effects generated by the feeling of insecurity? What implications can fears have on social relations? In these contexts, how can we understand the phenomenon of rejection (which can even lead to *ghettoisation*)?

The study was undertaken using a resolutely comparative perspective. The following fellows attended the seminar: Sophie Body-Gendrot (University of Paris V-Sorbonne), Anna Barker, Sarah Blandy and Adam Crawford (University of Leeds), Zoltan Csefalvay (University of Budapest), Paul Curvers (Prevention Plan, City of Liège), Cândido Da Agra (University of Porto), Jean-Pierre Goor (King Baudouin Foundation, Brussels), Axel Groenemeyer (University of Dortmund), Magnus Hornqvist (University of Stockholm), Véronique Ketelaer (Forum Belge pour la Prévention et la Sécurité urbaine - Belgian Forum for Urban Safety), Krzysztof Krajewski (University of Jagiellonian, Krakow), Helmut Kury (University of Fribourg), Paul Ponsaers (University of Gand), Rita Raposo (University of Lisbon), Anabel Rodriguez Basanta (University of Barcelona), Klaus Sessar (University of Hamburg), Bernarda Tominc (University of Maribor), René Van Swaaningen (University of Rotterdam), Daniel Ventre (GERN – CNRS, Paris), Sirpa Virta (University of Tampere), Christina Zarafonitou (University Pantheon of Athens), Mathieu Chapeau, Bertrand Fincoeur, André Lemaître and Jacques Teller (University of Liège).


The main issues covered during the seminar concerned the impact of insecurity and/or the feeling of insecurity on the quality of life, and social cohesion. In this framework, the questions of social exclusion and the meaning of urban space and gated communities were tackled.

We are presenting here the synthesis of the work and opinions that fed these two days of discussions.

I – ON THE PERCEPTION OF CRIME AND THE FEELING OF INSECURITY

1 – Variability and variety of statistics

Criminology makes a traditional distinction between insecurity and the feeling of insecurity. While insecurity describes a state of society which some try to objectivise by collecting statistics on crime, carrying out surveys on victimisation or on self-reported delinquency, the feeling of insecurity is traditionally associated with the fear, which is then even more subjective, of delinquency experienced either personally or by family and friends (avoiding going out at night, fear of being victimised, trust in the police, etc). According to the traditional distinction, insecurity can also refer to a more abstract concern in terms of delinquency. Insecurity and the feeling of insecurity are



therefore either liable to develop together when the likely growth of “real” or “objectivised” insecurity increases the public fear of delinquency, or be inversely proportional to each other. The feeling of insecurity can indeed vary either way, irrespective of the delinquency figures.

The seminar mainly aimed at reminding of the distinction between insecurity and the feeling of insecurity and illustrating both notions and their possible discrepancy using various examples from other countries.

Broadly speaking, and since we should remain careful in this context of global comparisons, the perception of insecurity in northern European countries differs from that in southern and eastern European countries. Therefore, when we analyse the feeling of insecurity experienced by the Europeans when they find themselves in the street at night, Scandinavian and northern European countries (Iceland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland) show much lower figures than Mediterranean and eastern countries (Bulgaria, Poland, Greece, Italy, Portugal). The population in these latter countries report a higher level of fear of crime. Amongst the factors that determine the level of fear of crime, the overall public nuisances, especially those related to drugs, have a predominant position. The visibility of deviant acts, especially discarded litter, graffiti and gatherings of young people, play a major role on the population’s feeling of insecurity. The fight against these public nuisances, which assumes that reducing the problem is most often and simply achieved through the erasure of its visibility, is thus now considered as a key objective for the political decision-makers. The problem of public nuisance does not lie in the act itself but rather in its denunciation by the population. Complaints are triggered by the visibility of the act more than by its reality. The governing bodies, aware of the importance of what is at stake on the social and electoral levels, resort then largely to propositions of actions designed for fighting against this feeling of insecurity that is sometimes deemed as serious as a real insecurity which is, in other respects, difficult to measure.

Statistics and various classifications of the degree of various types of crime or of the measures of the police’s effectiveness flourish exponentially virtually everywhere in Europe. These assessment tools, regularly contested by those who are denounced as the “bad pupils”, actually face the traditional pitfalls of this field of study. The police’s proactivity and the usual black figure (undefined zone between “real” crime and “apparent” crime) and the grey figure (gap between “apparent” crime and the crime that is actually punished) are thus often put forward in order to legitimise the criticising of the methods used in this type of surveys.


However, different elements still come back constantly, as is the case of the fear of young people, which is pinpointed by numerous European studies.

2 - A “youth peril”?

According to English studies presented in the seminar, the population of legal minors can be held responsible for crime only in a very small proportion of cases. Statistics also show that the number of young people responsible for crimes is decreasing and that, on the contrary, these young people are among the most victimised population. However, representations commonly associate youth with delinquency. Should we then speak of a “youth peril”, and, if so, what can we learn from it?

The theme of juvenile delinquency is one of the most tackled by scientific literature. The term is however misleading in so far as it conveys a false impression of homogeneity, which does not actually exist. Should we approach the young population’s maladjustment in terms of cultural conflicts (divergence of moral norms between adults and young people) or regard the young people as a fragile population, eager to achieve objectives but incapable of doing so legally (which is often used to explain the delinquency of young people from disadvantaged social classes), the youth is still often considered as the main source of insecurity. Robert and Lascoumes (1974) evoked, more than thirty years ago, the existence of “anti-youth racism” that was then expressed by the dramatisation of their behaviour and a harsh social reaction that could only increase this social segregation by encouraging a withdrawal that precipitates their integration into sub-cultures.

The seminar was the opportunity to analyse some features of the issue in Britain and to exploit some elements for the purpose of generalisation. In 2003, in the frame of the fight against (the feeling of) insecurity, Britain adopted the *Antisocial Behaviour Act*. Amongst the powers granted by this regulation, the local authority has the right to pronounce a “dispersal order”, in specific cases, targeting the young people whose gathering is deemed intimidating. Here it is really the feeling of insecurity more than the “objective” insecurity that is taken into account. On analysing the practical aspect of the surveys, we can observe that, contrary to expectations, these orders are most often given in areas where the crime rate is comparatively low but the feeling of insecurity high, which is translated into the maladjustment of the distribution of risk or victimisation with the topography of this type of interventions. In this respect, the phenomenon shows the relation between the concern about safety and the actions made in relation with the young population. The fear that this age group gives rise to incites the governing bodies to try and reassure the population and implement various action programmes for this purpose. Still, the question whether we distinguish the notions of *youth at risk* from that of *youth as risk* clearly enough is raised. The confusion can indeed have consequences. Moreover a policy that focuses too much on the management of fear could be counterproductive such as deepening of the antagonism and resentment



between the young people and the police, denial of access to some resources to young people, paradoxical strengthening of the feeling of insecurity etc. The dispersal orders mentioned above also creates risks of privatisation of public spaces and fuelling up the exclusion mechanism. They also lead us to consider the concept of individual freedom in so far as this freedom can be anxiety-provoking for some people and engender the afore-mentioned defensive reactions.


Globally, it appears that the use of public spaces by young people has, over the last decades, rather decreased (less and less children now go to school unaccompanied) and has simultaneously changed (appropriation of some areas by certain groups). Restrictions to come and go, however, seem to be more the product of parental prescriptions and certain individuals' fears. The street therefore comes back into control through the exclusion of those who do not conform to the mass of consumers (Bannister *et al.*, 2006). The management or even the instrumentation of fear actually serves the authorities in the governance of communities.

3 – Management of fear and governance

This instrumentation of the feeling of insecurity is further validated by two other European examples: the Polish and French cases.

Poland, first of all, was characterised for a long time by a particularly high repressive tendency of its population when compared with the other European countries. From the 1960s till today, various studies (Kwasniewski, Kojder, 1979; Wojciechowska, 1994; Szymanowski, Szymanowska, 1996) have shown how high the rates of opinions in favour of death penalty or a general strengthening of sentences are. However we must note here that the concern about punishment is more pronounced when the population has to express themselves with abstract concepts than when they are asked about the relevance of death penalty for concrete cases. The Polish are also generally more inclined to consider their country as insecure rather than their local neighbourhood. This diffuse fear of crime was much exploited by politicians over the last years and largely taken over by media showing little concern about whether their coverage would fan up the flames or not. If the brothers Kaczynski have thus been qualified as *administrators of fear*, it appears that the theme of insecurity was abundantly used for governance purposes (or to access governance positions).

The situation of French suburbs and the citizens' fear of them was also a topic of debate. Again, but in different proportions and being aware that drawing hasty parallels would be irrelevant, the repetitive incidents in the problem suburbs of some large towns in France regularly fill many column inches. These occasional skirmishes sometimes lead to stigmatising sensitive neighbourhoods through the development of specific urban policies. The medias' role, who act as a magnifying mirror of events and politicians (elected or cam-



paigning), was therefore debated. The theme of the suburbs develops a deeply political dimension of governance and has an impact on the public opinion which is chronically cemented by various fears, objective and subjective, linked with urban insecurity. As a consequence these overall fears and the ways they are tackled have an aftermath on social exclusion and the meaning of urban space.

II – SOCIAL EXCLUSION, URBAN SPACE AND GATED COMMUNITIES

The first part of this synthesis focused on the perception of crime and the feeling of insecurity within our society. This second part aims at establishing the link between social exclusion, urban insecurity and the development of *gated communities* in Europe, new paradises produced by a brand new logic targeting security. However, let's consider social exclusion first.


1 – Social exclusion: how can it be defined?

Social exclusion is a real debate that concerns all western societies. Even if it is widely talked about, no one seems to agree on a shared definition. Great poverty and factor of delinquency for some, incapacity for some groups or individuals to benefit from a decent standard of living for the others, this concept was constantly redefined over time and according to criminological trends.

In the 1950s, the association poverty-crime, much in fashion until then, began to be massively rejected. Many studies showed indeed that poverty was far from being the only cause of crime and that other factors had to be taken into account. Some theoreticians started to develop an interest in the role of social networks and the way individuals share common values and exert an informal social control within their local neighbourhood or community. According to Janowitz, the structure of relational networks, or the density of social links, determine the propensity of a neighbourhood to embark on a process of self-regulation (mentioned by Carr, 2003), as well as the level of crime control and its intensity. These considerations and research were clearly in the same vein as the “social disorganization theory” established by Shaw and McKay. As early as 1942, they had both observed that the areas showing the highest crime rates were the same as those that were characterised by other kinds of social malaises and suggested that social disorganisation was the cause of the high and stable crime rate (Triplett *et al.*, 2003).

The end of the twentieth century was an era of deep social transformations. After the post-war decades characterised by a very high employment rate, stable family structures and especially an active Welfare State, we observed the explosion of societies marked by structural unemployment, economic instability, the diminution of state interventionism and social support, but also by an ever increasing instability within families and inter-personal relationships. The growing individualism, the fall of informal social control², and espe-

² Due to an ever-increasing social mobility and the dispersal of individuals looking for new areas where they can invest for their capital.



cially the increased pressures due to the breaking down of the Welfare State and to the fear of unemployment, played, and still do, an important role in what is called social exclusion.

The phenomenon of social exclusion therefore results from numerous causes. It generally includes an economical, political and spatial exclusion as well as restricted access to the main resources such as information, medical care, housing, and enforcement of security, law and order (Bawin-Legros *et al.*, 2001).

2 – Social exclusion: the cause of urban insecurity and polarisation of society?

The question of insecurity, which has been making headlines for years and keeps administrations and civil servants busy on a daily basis, is very often approached in its urban dimension that is the most visible and the most perceived by the population. To address it, police forces and administrations are trying to find balanced solutions between prevention and repression, between the fight against delinquency and incivilities and the reduction of exclusions, and between the rise of quality of life and the reduction of the feeling of insecurity.

Urban insecurity can be associated with another phenomenon that is indirectly linked with social exclusion: the polarisation of society. On the one hand, a majority of individuals who have an employment, show a civic attitude towards other citizens and live in a stable family structure, and, on the other hand, a disorganised and criminal or criminalistic minority dependent on social support and who live in unstable and dysfunctional family structures. This polarisation is also characterised spatially with, on the one side, the integrated individuals and, on the other one, the excluded individuals living in the poorest neighbourhoods, geographically separated from the rest of the population.

The fear of crime, constantly taken over by the media and associated with a lack of trust in the public authorities and justice as well as to the always more frequent resort to private protection systems, leads some categories of the very wealthy population to invest in a secured residence, at a distance from towns that are regarded as a source of delinquency. We have observed the emergence of *gated communities* for a couple of years now. The conception of these gated and secured neighbourhoods varies and changes according to the various national and cultural contexts. These gated communities can be found all over the world, especially in southern countries where security issues are more frequent, from Johannesburg to São Paulo, to Nairobi or La Paz, but also in the United States and now in Europe, mainly in the United Kingdom, France, Portugal or in other eastern European countries.



3 - Gated communities: a response for insecurity and fear of crime or a desire to live “amongst one’s peers”?

Appearing in the 1930s and then expanding for good in the 1960s-1970s, the *gated communities* are on a large scale linked with the intensification of the urbanisation of outlying suburbs. Their development is a complex phenomenon that involves various factors.

According to Le Goix (2003), these new neighbourhoods find their origin in four elements:


- The anti-urban romantic ideology that fostered the suburban model;
- The development of a legal structure, the co-ownerships, which applies private law regulations;
- The increased desire for security that encourages the enclosure of residences and neighbourhood watch;
- The exclusive aspect of these new residential complexes encompassing values of the aristocratic club or of the religious community and the rejection of social mixing.

In Britain, several studies show that the issue of insecurity is not always at the top of the population’s concerns. The development of *gated communities* appears to be mainly the result of the erosion of the ideals in social justice and equality, the shift from an informal system to a formal system of social control and particularly, the ever-growing desire to live with people with a similar status and benefit from a whole range of services.

The majority of the residents of this type of communities does not originate, contrary to public opinion, from the wealthiest classes, but indeed from the middle classes. For those who belong to the wealthiest classes, the “advantageous and convenient” aspect clearly prevails. The cost of housing within an ultra-secured *gated community* is also an important factor. The more expensive it is the more interesting the advantages are and the more the standard of living is considered as privileged.

In Hungary, more than the two fifths of the new buildings constructed in Budapest between 2002 and 2007 include security devices (alarms, armoured doors, cameras etc.). In this country from the former eastern bloc the democratic transition, the shift from a planned economy to a market economy and the integration into the European Union had two major consequences: an increased social polarisation and the weakening of the state regulation.

These two elements enabled not only the development of private and secured housing but also a new distribution between the residents from the new and modern housings that are implemented with all the necessary conveniences and the residents from precast buildings dating from the communist period. The residents of the first type of housing belong to a new wealthy middle class, in comparison with



more under-privileged classes. The development of gated communities in Hungary, which is more than just a matter of insecurity, is linked, on the one hand, with the political transition that permitted the liberalisation and the opening of the market, and, on the other hand, with the emergence of a wealthier middle class, wishing to differentiate from the others and to adopt the same lifestyle as their European peers.

In Portugal, the appearance of these gated and secured communities also grew exponentially from the mid-1980s. Therefore, in the region of Lisbon, these new secured buildings are mainly located in seaside resort towns (Cascais) and more touristic places (Lisbon, Sintra). If security is again often mentioned, the people living in these new habitations also mention green areas, the cleanliness and the regular maintenance of the residences as the major influential motives in their choice.

Social cohesion and the fact of “living amongst one’s peers”, however, do not seem to be factors influencing the choice of living in such a community.

Finally, the secured housing estates which are initially the result of private estate operations do not hesitate in some cases to claim and obtain a political autonomy, thus establishing themselves as municipalities in order to redirect the residents’ taxes and duties thus creating entirely self managed, and even secessionists, private spaces (e.g.: the region of Los Angeles, twelve *gated communities* have become municipalities such as that of Canyon Lake in 1991).

This poses the question of the urban fragmentation and brings us back to the question raised earlier about the privatisation of the public space and about one of its components: security.

Dream-merchants or tranquillity-sellers, the catalogues offering this type of habitations to potential future purchasers seem indeed to be promising a “safe” life to individuals in search of belonging to an “exclusive” class of privileged people. Yet, beyond the privileged minority’s well being, we can still see the shadow of the debate mentioned earlier between reality and perception of crime, security and feeling of insecurity, this dialogue being likely to engender a social aftermath in terms of exclusion or solidarity.

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